Sacred Web Conference

An Introduction from His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales

September 23rd and 24th, 2006
Myer Horowitz Theatre, University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta

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In these uprooted times, there is a great need for constancy; a need for those who can rise above the clamour, the din and the sheer pace of our lives to help us to rediscover those truths that are immutable and eternal; a need for those who can speak of that eternal wisdom which is called the perennial philosophy. Looking at the programme for this Conference being organized by *Sacred Web* on the theme of "Tradition in the Modern World", and at the list of speakers, I know that you will be hearing just this kind of teaching from just these kinds of people. Within the overall theme, there would seem to be a marvellous diversity of matters being discussed – matters related to religion, the arts, the economy, the environment and much else.

Although, very sadly, I cannot be with you, I do want to say that I am always delighted to receive the latest issue of *Sacred Web* because, so often, I come across such deeply revealing and enlightening articles, rich in content and diverse in subject matter. In addition, through the work of the Temenos Academy, of which I am Patron, I have been fortunate to enjoy the writings of some of your colleagues – people such as Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr and, of course, the late Dr. Martin Lings, whose presence amongst us is so profoundly missed.

The Temenos Academy has been, and remains, closely associated with many of those who have written, and continue to write for *Sacred Web* and, indeed, for *Sophia* and other related journals. From the beginning, with the launch of the original *Temenos* review, the Temenos Academy has not only been devoted to what its founders have referred to as "the arts of the imagination", but has also been committed both to the perennial philosophy and to the notion that Man is, at root, a spiritual creature with spiritual and intellectual needs which have to be nourished if we are to fulfil our potential. Both of these matters are at the heart of the teachings of *Sacred Web*.

Temenos Academy and *Sacred Web* are also, of course, dedicated to an exploration of the role of Tradition in the modern world, the subject of this Conference, and, indeed, to a critique of the false premises of Modernity – a critique set out in one of the seminal texts of the traditionalists, René Guénon's *The Reign of Quantity*. Many find this teaching difficult, not least because it asks us to question our very mode of being; and perhaps because it asks us to question an ideology, in the form of Modernism, that has become so set in our minds that any other way of being seems in some sense fanciful and "unrealistic".

However, the teachings of the traditionalists should not, in any sense, be taken to mean that they seek, as it were, to repeat the past – or, indeed, simply to draw a distinction between the present and the past. Their's is not a nostalgia for the past, but a yearning for the sacred and, if they defend the past, it is because in the pre-modern world all civilizations were marked by the presence of the sacred. As I understand it, in referring to Tradition they refer to a metaphysical reality and to underlying principles that are timeless – as true now as they have ever been and will be. And, by way of contrast, in referring to Modernism they refer to a particular (though false) definition of reality; a particular (though false) manner of seeing and engaging with the world that, likewise, is distinguished not by time, but by its ideology.

In an article written in 1983 for the traditionalist journal *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Professor Nasr put it this way:

> When we use the term 'modern' we mean neither contemporary nor up-to-date… Rather, for us 'modern' means that which is cut off from the Transcendent, from the immutable principles which in reality govern all things and which are made known to man through revelation in its most universal sense. Modernism is thus contrasted with tradition…; the latter implies all that which is of Divine Origin along with its manifestations and deployments on the human plane while the former by contrast implies all that is merely human and now ever more increasingly subhuman, and all that is divorced and cut off from the Divine source. [1]

Most especially, therefore, we can see that it is the very timeless quality of these immutable principles of Tradition that makes its teachings so timely.

For me, the teachings of Tradition suggest the presence of a reality that can bring about a reality of integration, and it is this reality that can be contrasted with so much of Modernism's obsession with dis-integration, dis-connection and de-construction – that which is sometimes termed the "malaise of modernity". Cut off at the root from the Transcendent, Modernism has become deracinated and has separated itself – and thereby everything that comes within its thrall – from that which integrates; that which enables us to turn towards and reconnect with the Divine.

In this way, the loss of Tradition cuts to the very core of our being since it conditions that which we can "know" and "be". For Modernism, by its unrelenting emphasis on the quantitative view of reality, limits and distorts the true nature of the Real and our perception of it. Whilst it has enabled us to know much that has been of material benefit, it also prevents us from knowing that which I would like to refer to as the knowledge of the Heart; that which enables us to be fully human.

This dilemma is captured in ancient notions of balance and harmony; notions that are, for example, expressed in many guises in that wonderful Kabbalistic diagram of the Tree of Life.

As the Temenos Fellow, Warren Kenton, so beautifully explains in his lectures to the students of the Academy, the teaching of the Tree of Life is that the "active" and the "passive" aspects of life, which on their own may lead to imbalance and disharmony, must be, can only be, brought together in harmony by the influx into our lives of the Divine and the Sacred. Whether or not we interpret this image as an explanation of an outer or an inner orientation, it is in this way, and only in this way, that the forces, or characteristics, of expansion and constraint can be brought into balance.

But, of course, in both the inner and outer dimensions of our lives, many of us, at present, experience the very imbalance and disharmony that this mystical framework, and, indeed, the teachings of mystics of all times, show to be harmful or, to use a contemporary term, "unsustainable".

And this leads me to a final and somewhat troubling matter that lies at the heart of Tradition and its critique of Modernism. None of us, I imagine, can fail to be conscious of, and be concerned about, those matters that might together be called "the environmental crisis of the twenty-first century". Indeed, none other than Sir Martin Rees, the Astronomer Royal and President of the Royal Society, in his book *Our Final Century*, has said that:

> …in the twenty-first century, humanity is more at risk than ever before from the misapplication of science. And the environmental pressures induced by collective human actions could trigger catastrophes more threatening than any natural hazards. 2

For many years, I have been trying – often in the face of relentless criticism and ridicule – to draw attention to some of the elements of this crisis and to the ways in which they are linked to conventional values. At times, when in optimistic mood, I am encouraged to believe that we can come to our senses in time and change our ways of being before we are obliged to do so by catastrophic circumstances. But I am afraid that I do not always take this view. Often, I find myself convinced of the warnings given not only by Sir Martin Rees but also, of course, by sages and mystics of all faiths and of all time; warnings of the coming of a Dark Age, an age in which our ignorance and arrogance – a dangerous combination, surely – will lead us, indeed may already have led us, towards catastrophe. The present examples of pestilence, flood, famine, storm and climatic disruption are surely evidence enough. At the very least, they seem to foretell of conditions of chronic imbalance and disharmony – no doubt as much a part of our inner as our outer condition.

In all of this, the practice of modern science more or less ignores the question of what the ultimate goal and purpose of intelligence and knowledge is. Materialist science, it seems, more or less assumes that a continuous and progressive exploratory expansion of knowledge of the physical world will inevitably lead to a desirable end where all but a few of our problems will be solved. I note, however, that it does this in the face of very considerable evidence – evidence that science itself provides – that it will not.

Indeed, our ignorance in these matters seems to me to be in direct proportion to our obsession with information. More than ever before, we have information from everywhere and about everything – and it is available to us literally at the press of a button. But information, often it would seem for its own sake, is not knowledge; and knowledge is not wisdom. We have no lack of information but, with the loss of the values and principles of which Tradition speaks, we lose touch with that perennial wisdom to which this Conference is dedicated. In this, I am reminded of those prophetic lines from T. S. Eliot:

> Where is the life we have lost in living?
> Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
> Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
> The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
> Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust. [3]

The traditionalist perspective is that we are living at the end of an historical cycle. At the beginning of this cycle all and every possibility is latent. However, as the cycle evolves or unfolds, these possibilities begin to manifest themselves in the world of time and space, beginning with the highest and gradually moving towards the lower. At the end of the cycle, the very lowest possibilities manifest themselves. The traditionalists tell us that at the cosmic level this process cannot be withheld or interrupted. It must take place. The cycle, they say, must exhaust itself before a new one can replace it.

I know that this might seem to suggest that we are entirely the passive victims of this cosmic unfolding. However, as I understand it, the traditionalists would go on to say that if this were the only reality then all attempts to pursue and align ourselves with spiritual realities and experience would be in vain. And that cannot possibly be. Indeed, it is precisely on the individual plane and through our understanding of and attachment to traditional norms of metaphysical doctrine and spiritual practice that we can, in a measure, transcend the baleful influence of the descent that is the eventual exhaustion and end of our cycle of history and prepare ourselves and the world for the beginning of the next. It is in this way, and perhaps only in this way, that we can overcome the mind-numbing despair of Modernism – not by false optimism, but by an understanding of and an attachment to the truly Real.

I hope that some part of your deliberations at this Conference will address these issues and, perhaps, provide guidance for those of us who do not claim to be scholars. For much of my life has been, and remains, devoted to finding practical solutions to what, at first, seem to be impossible difficulties – and sometimes to speak for those whose voices are unheard amidst the clamour of Modernism. In this, I recognize that true action is dependent upon constant reflection – the redeeming aspect of the nature of harmony and balance. I pray that your deliberations will help in this task through not only describing the difficulties that we face, but also showing us the ways in which we might seek to make the necessary changes in our lives.

Despite not being able to join you in Edmonton, I much look forward to reading the texts of the conference that will be delivered. I hope that you will also find inspiration from them and that they will be widely distributed and discussed, especially beyond those who already subscribe to the teachings of the traditionalists. Whatever our view, and whatever our tradition, I am sure that we will have much to learn from your deliberations – I wish you a most harmonious Conference.

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1 This quotation is taken from an article by Professor Nasr entitled ‘Reflections on Islam and Modern Thought’,which was published in the journal *Studies in Comparative Thought*, Summer-Autumn 1983, Volume 15, Nos. 3 and 4 (Double Issue), 164-165.

2 Martin Rees, *Our Final Century*, Arrow Books, 2003, 186.

3 This quotation is taken the Opening Stanza of T. S. Eliot's 'Choruses from 'The Rock', from *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909*-1950, Harcourt, Brace & World Inc. , New York, 1952, 96

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